

# THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

*Rob Jenkins is an associate professor of English at Perimeter College of Georgia State University and author of Building a Career in America's Community Colleges.*

ADVICE

## What Makes a Good Teacher?

You may never be as funny, approachable, or creative as your favorite teacher — the key is to try



Most of these things I've mentioned here are personality facets. No doubt, there is some truth to the idea that certain people are just born teachers because they happen to be blessed with these traits in abundance. **AT THE SAME TIME**, even if we are not "born teachers," we can work to develop the qualities of those teachers in ourselves. We may never be as funny, approachable, or creative as our favorite teachers. But simply by recognizing those traits as desirable, by acknowledging that we don't possess them to the degree we would like, and by committing ourselves to working on those areas, we can become more approachable, creative, and, yes, funnier than we would be otherwise. It's the journey of self-improvement that makes the difference.

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When I say "best teachers," I'm not just talking about the ones I liked best. I mean the teachers who had the greatest influence on me — the ones whose names I still remember to this day, even though in some cases it's been more than 40 years since I sat in their classrooms. —

What made them good teachers?

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1. **They are good-natured.** The best teachers tend to be approachable, as opposed to sour and forbidding.
2. **They are professional without being aloof.** - Most academics tend to keep students at arm's length — the obvious message being, "I'm your teacher, not your friend." Clearly, professionalism requires a certain amount of boundary-setting, which can be difficult. My best teachers always seemed to effortlessly walk that very fine line between being an authority figure and being someone I felt I could talk to.
3. **They have a good sense of humor.** They may or may not be ready for the Improv, but they don't take themselves or their subject matter too seriously.
4. **They seem to enjoy what they do.** Some faculty members don't really like students. They are the academics who constantly whine about their workload and complain about how rude or unprepared their students are. I've often wondered: Why are such people even in this profession? What did they expect? The teachers I remember as the very best were those who clearly loved teaching and got a kick out of associating with students every day.
5. **They are demanding without being unkind.** Some academics take great pride in being disliked, wearing their unpopularity like a badge of honor. In my experience, however, most students want to be challenged; they don't mind if a lot is expected of them. They just don't want their professors to be jerks or insufferable know-it-alls. My best teachers were demanding without being mean-spirited.
6. **They seem comfortable in their own skin.** Perhaps one reason students tend to like these faculty is that they like themselves, without being in love with the sound of their own voices.
7. **They are tremendously creative.** They are always willing to entertain new ideas or try new things — "Innovation" is a buzzword nowadays, but the term seems applied almost exclusively to the use of technology. My best teachers, though, were truly innovative, coming up with creative ways to help us understand, internalize, and remember what they were trying to teach. What made those teachers innovative was not tools or technology but their minds.
8. **They make teaching look easy.** We all know it isn't. Ultimately, great teachers are like great athletes, dancers, or musicians. We may know, cognitively, that what they do isn't easy, but they seem to do it so effortlessly that we're lulled into thinking it's no big deal — until we try it ourselves. Then we learn quickly just how difficult it is to play a sport or an instrument — or teach — at a very high level.

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